

# THE NEGRO and THE U A W

LABOR, AMERICAN POLITICS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR EQUALITY

by MICHAEL SHUTE National Chairman, Y P S L

15¢

Published by :

New York Executive Committee  
Left Wing (Majority) Tendency  
Young Peoples Socialist League

New York: 1963





## INTRODUCTION

It is becoming more and more apparent that the hottest area of the civil rights struggle will be in the North. It is not only for socialists that the equivocal role of the labor movement in this respect is of grave concern. The attacks of the NAACP and its labor secretary, Herbert Hill upon union discrimination have been met in an unsatisfactory way by the labor leadership. More importantly even, labor has failed to take up the cudgels against the Kennedy administration in a real fight for jobs. The lack of jobs - in an economy wedded to war production and the defense of capitalism in the cold war, has now become key to the Negro struggle.

A differential between Negro and white employment has always existed. What is new in 1963 - as contrasted to, let us say, 1948, is that now, the level of blue collar employment generally has reached a (proportionately) new low which threatens to be permanent in a period when the society as a whole is not depressed as it was in the thirties. Such demands as FEPC, while absolutely essential, are limited in effect. We talk in this pamphlet of a Negro depression. This is the nub of the issue. It also provides an understanding of how, with appropriate union militance, a Negro-white-labor alliance is possible. The crisis of both Negro and white labor is intimately connected with the crisis of the economy as a whole and Kennedy's program. A break with Kennedy and his Party, and a move towards a new and more basic solution to the Cold War political and economic stalemate is therefore prerequisite to a genuinely successful conclusion to the Negro struggle.

Aside from compellingly fundamental moral considerations, socialists are especially concerned with the progress of the more militant groupings of Negro trade unionists because their very demands speak for the real and today not fully understood needs of the white workers as well. Their protests against the failures of the white union leadership may force them to longer range solutions, solutions which are truly proportionate to the scope of the crisis at hand.

In analyzing the crisis, we discuss the decline of the United Automobile Workers as a militant force for progress. The lineup within the UAW provides an especially graphic view of the conflict. The UAW is still, on balance, the cleanest, most substantially democratic, and fundamentally, the most socially oriented and militant large union in America. Yet, that comparative progressivism is no longer even barely sufficient, when ranged against the needs of the white and Negro workers and the Negro struggle as a whole.

This article has been expanded from an academic paper: perhaps the footnotes will be helpful for those who wish a more detailed examination of the problems. In addition, a large part of the article is written in a somewhat detached, "academic" style which may not be fully appropriate for the frankly partisan purposes for which this pamphlet is intended.



But apart from the necessity for quelling prejudice on the job, which characterized most industrial unions, the U.A.W. leadership fought in an especially extraordinary and straightforward way against racism. During the Detroit race riot of 1943, Walter Reuther spoke at a joint UAW-NAACP rally. In a challenge to the racists, he promised that "the UAW-CIO would tell any worker that refused to work with a colored worker that he could leave the plant because he did not belong there." This was not a statement that a more conventional union leader would have made, for despite the compulsion of cooperation during strikes, many UAW workers, rural in origin and prejudiced, balked at working side by side and on equal terms with Negroes. Walkouts against enforcement of seniority provisions in the cases of Negroes were frequent. Management was not backward in encouraging white bias in the shop. Yet the UAW leaders, on the whole idealists and to a large extent, like Reuther, socialists or ex-socialists, were unequivocal.<sup>1</sup> Reuther himself is understandably proud of the UAW record. He claims that for twenty years the UAW has worked to get company agreement to a fair employment clause in the contract. "We have spent from three to five o'clock in the morning when we had a seven o'clock strike deadline."<sup>2</sup> The International Union did not hesitate recently to place one of its Southern locals in trusteeship for violating UAW policies on integration.<sup>3</sup> Except for the CIO Packinghouse Union, the UAW's civil rights record, inside the union and out, is unapproachable, not only in the labor movement, but in the society as a whole. It is all the more remarkable considering the strong inbuilt bias of the membership<sup>4</sup> and the racial tinderbox of Detroit in which the union is centered.

Yet with its excellent record, the UAW leadership is under attack from articulate Negro workers in its own ranks. Let us now examine by whom and why.

---

1. Howe and Widick, op. cit., pp 219-221.

2. Hearings of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, held in Detroit, Michigan, Dec. 14-15, 1960 (U.S. Gov't Printing Office, 1961) Testimony of Walter Reuther, p. 42. Reuther went slightly overboard in claiming that in the 1943 riot Negroes and whites worked well together in the shop. In the larger and stronger UAW shops they did. Where the union was less entrenched they did not. See f.n. above. He also said however, with truth, that the UAW had lost NLRB elections because of its adamance on integration.

3. Employment: 1961 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Report (U.S. Gov't Printing Office) p. 141. This report also provides documentation on the policies of the craft unions.

4. Howe and Widick, op. cit., p. 9. "Appeal to the top of the mind of a factory worker who came to Detroit ten years ago from Alabama and you may, if you are skillful and persistent, make a scratch; but how shallow that scratch seems when compared to the deep pools of prejudice that well up in his unconscious and, to a large extent, his conscious emotions."



THE TRADE UNION LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

The Negro-American Labor Council was formed in 1960 to organize Negro opposition to discrimination within labor's ranks. It was led by A. Philip Randolph, the leading American Negro trade unionist. The NALC was attacked as a "dual union" by George Meany, despite the long history of respected ethnic organizations within the labor movement (Jewish Labor Committee, Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, United Hebrew Trades). Randolph was also censured by the AFL-CIO Executive Council. In Meany's words, Randolph was to blame for "the gap that has developed between organized labor and the Negro community."

The most recent NALC convention, held in New York City, November 1962, retreated somewhat from its previous attacks on the Federation. The NALC failed to keep pace with the new momentum of the needs of the Negro community in regard to jobs--it failed to level the necessary attack on the AFL-CIO's conservative reluctance to wage a real fight on the unemployment question.<sup>1</sup> Resisting strong pressure, it refrained from endorsing the NAACP plan to decertify discriminatory unions (the vote on its executive board was 7-6) and heard a speech by George Meany, who attacked Hill. No NAACP spokesman was invited to respond. In addition, the Randolph leadership took steps against the activity of its Chicago chapter, one of the more active and militant NALC affiliates.

The Detroit NALC delegation was opposed to Randolph's approach. The Detroiters strongly support the NAACP policy and favor a more aggressive policy in the direction of building Negro caucuses within the unions (even though it may not be stated publicly in those words). These Detroit NALC members are leaders of an organization in Detroit, formed at about the same time as the NALC but independent of it: the Trade Union Leadership Council. The TULC has 8,000 members, the majority of whom are UAW members. It also contains the leadership of a laborers' local, many hotel and restaurant workers, bus drivers and dairy employees.<sup>2</sup>

The TULC functions not only as a Negro protest organization but as a social club, with a headquarters (the A. Philip Randolph Freedom House) and a bar reserved for members and guests. "Indeed, it maintains an active program of social, educational and social action activities. Thus the club reinforces its ideological appeal with... the loyalty of its members to a private club."<sup>3</sup> Many TULC members also

---

1. The job issue has become even more obvious as a central issue since the NALC convention. Randolph's leadership in the forthcoming March on Washington, however, is a promise of a return to militance.

2. David Greenstone, Labor and Politics (PhD thesis), University of Chicago, 1963. Chapter two, pp 87-88.

3. Ibid.



belong to block clubs in Detroit. The block club movement, which has become extremely potent in city politics in the past decade, has the nominal purpose of neighborhood improvement. In fulfilling that function, however, it has also been used by Negroes as a channel for community protest.

TULC's complaints were directed most strongly against discriminatory policies in the skilled trades and union acquiescence in employer bias in hiring and promotions. Horace Sheffield, a secondary UAW leader and TULC vice-president (in practice its most dynamic spokesman) indicated the mood of the Negro militants when he told the Civil Rights Commission: "Today the Negro trade unionists have gotten away from the old radical theory that you don't call in the cops no matter how bad the robbers are." Sheffield said that the TULC is asking that the anti-closed shop provision in the Taft-Hartley Act be enforced against those building trades locals which exclude non-whites. He also demanded other NLRB sanctions against discrimination.<sup>1</sup>

This willingness to "call in the cops" is one aspect of the TULC clash with the Reuther leadership, which has been reluctant to wage a serious fight against Meany and the building trades on the discrimination issue. The UAW hierarchy, so conscious of its own record and promise on the issue, must of necessity find itself embarrassed by its vacillations.

The second area of conflict is more direct and at the same time more ambiguous. For years, the UAW has been active in Michigan politics through COPE, which dominates the Detroit Democratic Party and which is in turn dominated by the UAW. Democratic precinct organizations in most of Detroit are directly or indirectly creatures of the UAW-COPE phalanx. During the last decade, the UAW has become established in city politics and has functioned less and less like the organization which rhetoricized in 1948 about joining with other liberal groups to remold the Democratic Party nationally. In other words, the union has begun 1) to have a stake in the settled political scene, and 2) to solidify relationships with non-labor liberals and other elements whose own compromises the UAW must take into account in its political activity. This means "moderation" on many issues, including specifically "Negro" issues such as urban renewal, housing and school integration. Yet this is precisely the moment when Negroes are calling for a settling of accounts at whatever expense. They will not accept compromises or go-slow tactics on such matters as housing integration. In the tinderbox of Detroit this attitude, represented by the TULC, results in conflict with the UAW. The union has paid a high price for its "success" in state and city politics.

---

1. Civil Rights Commission, Detroit hearings, op.cit., pp 78-79. His testimony goes into considerable detail on the TULC program on apprenticeship training, seniority, minority education, etc.



Alongside of this issue is the matter of Negro officers in the union. The UAW has never had a Negro member of the Executive Board. Executive Board members are regional directors; since Negroes are a majority in no single region, none has ever been elected as a director. In the 'forties, the Communist Party bloc inside the union agitated for a place on the Board reserved for a Negro. The Reuther caucus campaigned against it and by a slow process of education convinced most of the active Negro members that the CP proposal was racism in reverse.<sup>1</sup>

Now, almost two decades later, Negroes complain that they have been betrayed by the Reuther leadership. Six months ago there was still not a Negro on the Board. There is a similar problem in the union locals. In 1952, a random sample of Detroit locals found that Negroes constituted about 19% of UAW membership in the city, or about 58,000 workers. Negroes today constitute about one-quarter to one-third of the average large UAW local in Detroit. Therefore, since Negroes are in a minority in all locals, they have not had representation as union officers and staff members nearly proportional to their strength in the union as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

The second clash between the TULC and the union comes, then, from a Negro grievance that in city politics and in the running of the union, the Reuther caucus does not take account of the Negro's pressing needs.

There is one basic interlocking factor in the fight--now in its formative stage--between the TULC and the UAW leadership. Its exposition is an excellent way of using the race question to understand the decline of the UAW as a union in an overall sense.

### THE NEGRO DEPRESSION

It is fashionable to refer to economic lapses in the post-World War II era as "recessions." By and large this is a correct designation of economic crises which span a temporary stage in the business cycle and do not involve America in the wracking insecurity which scarred the 1930's. Unemployment levels, while permanently high, do not approach in any way the level of the 'thirties.

Yet for the mass production work force, the series of post-war recessions is much more than a low point in a shortly-to-revive cycle. Automation and the failures of the economy have begun to take a permanent toll. Thousands of laid-off workers will never return to the assembly

---

1. Howe and Widick, op. cit., pp 223-225. It is probable that Reuther's logic was lent a hand by the reputation of the CP, which during the war had supported piecework and had denounced A. Philip Randolph's proposed March on Washington for jobs. The more radical Negroes (not directly within the orbit of the CP), to whom the proposal might have had appeal, certainly remembered that.

2. James Wilson, Negro Politics, pp 28-31.



line. This is particularly true for the automobile industry (as well as for steel and packinghouse). One breathtaking statistic illustrates the point. In 1957, 602,000 workers produced 7,200,000 cars and trucks. In 1962, it took only 559,000 workers, 7 per cent fewer than in 1957, to turn out 8,200,000 cars and trucks, 13 per cent above 1957 production.<sup>1</sup> Automobile workers are losing jobs at the same time that more jobs are needed (Walter Reuther states that 1,350,000 new people will be entering the job market each year).<sup>2</sup>

Other statistics, dry but illuminating, emphasize the problem. The Department of Labor has compiled statistics showing the percentage of workers in each category unemployed, classified by industry. These statistics cover the years 1958-60.

In the year 1958, a bad year for auto, the average percentage of unemployed in non-agricultural industry was 6.5%. The break-down by industry reveals that auto had the highest percentage unemployed: 21.3%, 14.8%--almost three and a half times--higher than the average. The next highest percentage unemployed was in construction, with 13.7% idle.

The next two years are considerably less startling, but still indicative. In 1959, 10.1% of the automobile work force was unemployed. This was surpassed only by the 12.0% figure in construction, and was still twice the over-all average of 5.1 per cent.

In 1960, the figure for auto was 8.4%. This was surpassed by construction (12.2%); finished textiles (10.5%); forest, fishing and mining (9.5%); and lumber and wood products (9.1%). The average was again 5.1%, this time only 3.3% lower than the auto average.<sup>3</sup>

Thus from 1958 to 1960 the figures level off. They are still significant, however, and show that auto has gotten the worst of the post-war recessions. The 1958 high was due to sales difficulties peculiar to the auto industry; but the continued high level of unemployment is indicated by the two later figures.

---

1. Edwin A. Lahey, "Unemployed Law", New York Post, May 29, 1963.

2. Ibid.

3. Employment and Earnings, bulletin of the Division of Manpower and Employment Statistics, Department of Labor, June, 1962, Annual Supplement Issue, Vol. 8, no. 12. P. 87, table SA-33. These figures are supplemented by statistics on the percentage of laborers in manufacturing who were unemployed. In 1961, that percentage was 15.3, topped only by construction, at 21.7%. For experienced workers, the over-all percentage unemployed for 1961 was 5.9%. Thus 1961 continues the pattern set by the period 1958-60. Ibid, p. 88, table SA-34.



The union as a whole, therefore, is faced with a serious crisis, which the passage of time can only exacerbate. But if the general membership is hit hard, the Negro worker is hit even harder. The percentage of unemployed Negro males is slightly more than double that of whites.<sup>1</sup>

Table I.

YEAR	% White Males Idled	% Nonwhite Males Idled
1958	6.1	13.7
1959	4.6	11.5
1960	4.8	10.7
1961	5.7	12.2

These figures probably slightly exaggerate the ratio of white to Negro unemployment in the auto industry, where Negroes are better off in comparison to whites than in most other fields. On the other hand, unemployment levels of both Negroes and whites in the automobile industry are considerably higher than the above chart indicates. In 1961, 17.6 per cent of Negroes in the experienced worker category, in non-mine and non-farm occupations, were unemployed. The comparable figure for whites is 13.3 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

If we take that 17.6% figure and knock it down a point or two for Detroit (Michigan as a whole is not among the top states in unemployment) we still do not arrive at a true picture of the situation. According to statistics published by the National Urban League in March, 1961, of Detroit's 285,000 man Negro work force, 112,850, or 39%, were unemployed! Surely Negro leaders are justified in saying that, if white unemployment were that high, there would be blood in the streets.

In addition to automation, the Negro is hurt by the decentralization process which industry is undergoing. He is concentrated in the large metropolitan areas. When an auto company moves its plant to the suburbs, he cannot follow it. When the plant moves six hundred miles to a suburb or rural area, he is not there to receive it.

These facts shed considerable light on the seeming ingratitude of the Negro for the excellent UAW record. The TULC, like the Negro movement in the South, mirrors newly-awakened aspirations--brought to life in large part by the Southern struggle--of the depression- and slum-ridden Negro.

---

1. Employment and Earnings, pp 60-61.

2. Ibid, p. 89, table SA-36.



## THE ROLE OF THE U A W

But clearly Walter Reuther is not responsible for the Negro's condition. The UAW always defended the right of Negroes to equal job opportunity and pay standards. It cannot in the slightest be accused of responsibility for the absence of apprenticeship openings and educational opportunities for Negroes. Openings in the craft unions and a decent educational chance for the Negro would considerably ease the Negro-white differential, although not unemployment as a whole. But there are few such problems within the UAW itself.

It is precisely this fact--that Reuther cannot be held responsible--which, used as a defense by UAW leaders, symbolizes the problem. There is, for the first time since the defeat of the Thomas-Addes-CP leadership, a serious gap in program and understanding between the hierarchy and a section of the rank and file. Obviously this did not happen overnight, but it is manifested most clearly at this point in the UAW's history. There have been opposition caucuses since 1947, but none with the serious potential of the Sheffield-led TULC (it is perhaps incorrect to label the Sheffieldites an opposition caucus in the strict sense of the term, but such is clearly the direction of their development).

The UAW leadership has adopted a bitter tone toward Sheffield and the TULC. "'Horace never does any work,' one of his fellow UAW staff representatives complained, 'he doesn't coordinate anyone, he just writes articles about a Negro on the Executive Board.'" There are also 'psychological' explanations of Sheffield's role which completely miss the point: "He's been carrying the ball so long now, he's been so exposed as the leader in this fight; he's become defensive, and the race issue dominates his life... He has become emotionally scarred himself and he hurts others."<sup>1</sup>

The fact is that the Negro community as a whole is concerned primarily with their opportunities and status as Negroes. Negroes are today, in Detroit and other large cities, second-class citizens. To them, the issue is long overdue. Compromises have failed so often in the past that when UAW leaders explain the "practicalities" of craft union strength in the AFL-CIO or the "practical" needs of the UAW political coalition in Detroit, they talk to a wall. These things are no longer of consequence to the Negro community, because its loyalty is to its own needs. It is to this that the UAW has not accommodated itself.

In this essentially new situation, Reuther has not shown his usual adeptness at channeling bread and butter discontent in the cranks into workable or at least seemingly workable proposals. Traditionally, he has attempted to make basically political gains, welfaristic benefits that European labor has won through politics, over the bargaining table. Examples of this are the open-the-books demand in 1945-46; the guaranteed annual wage; and the shorter work week. Now, however, the UAW is more

---

1. Greenstone, op. cit., p. 96.



closely tied politically to a Democratic administration which is adamantly opposed to shorter hours or the kind of sizable bargaining gains which might help off-set the effects of unemployment in the industry. What has fundamentally happened is ironic. Reuther used the bargaining table to escape the uncertainties of independent politics. Now, however, his political connections prevent him from bargaining for solutions.

His proposals, accordingly, no longer have the dramatic appeal to the ranks that they did in 1945 or even in 1955, much less any important relevance to the problem. This is illustrated by two of his recent statements. "Let's dust off the Employment Act of 1946," he said, "It's, still practically new, it's been used so little."<sup>1</sup> The Act to which he refers has no teeth. Reuther is really saying, "We need a government program to provide jobs." Another Reuther proposal, played up by the UAW, was the elevation of UAW workers to white collar jobs with the auto companies. The auto companies, not only aware of the tremendous re-training costs this would involve, but also afraid that the UAW wanted an opening for its militants on the hard-to-organize white collar level, were understandably hesitant.<sup>2</sup> In any case, it is hard to see how such a program could do more than chip away at joblessness. Reuther's third recent proposal, with somewhat more appeal and of greater bargaining potential, was for aircraft companies to create an industry-wide fund for severance pay for laid-off workers.<sup>3</sup> But again, this is only chipping away.

One possible avenue for increasing UAW membership is the organizing of technicians and professional workers. But after several years, the UAW Office and Technical Department has recruited only 35,000 members. In the period 1960-61 alone, membership in the UAW as a whole dropped by 135,122.<sup>4</sup> Its settlements in the past two years with such companies as Chrysler, Ford, Allis-Chalmers and Studebaker-Packard have been almost exclusively geared to raise standards for employed workers.

The UAW, therefore, is failing to deal with the heart of its problem in a way that might make possible a rapprochement with its Negro membership. Let us be careful here to avoid two misconceptions. There is no suggestion either that the TULC is calling for a break with Kennedy or that the UAW by itself could create a solution to the unemployment problem. There is, however, the suggestion that the Reuther leadership has lost the ability to dramatize issues to its membership. A major cause of this is the UAW relationship to Kennedy.

If the UAW has been trapped by politics nationally, it has been victimized by the same irony in the city of Detroit. It is not completely

---

1. Lahey, op. cit.

2. Business Week, March 31, 1962, p. 83.

3. Business Week, April 14, 1962, pp 139-140.

4. Ibid., p. 144.



fair to imply that only the union's political alliances prevent it from pressing seriously for, say, integrated housing. The white rank and file are also a roadblock. "The closer to home a race issue is, the less vigorous the union can afford to be on its behalf. Championing legislation which, if passed, would have few immediate effects on the white workers in Detroit may be one thing. Championing a law which would for example end discrimination in the private housing market is quite another."<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, the TULC is demanding precisely such a law. The TULC's argument--that Negroes cannot afford to wait until white prejudice is eradicated--is in accord with every principle of UAW activity in the past. But now there is a conflict.

This conflict was illustrated clearly in the 1961 mayoralty election and the events which preceded it. During the administration of Louis Miriani, a middle-of-the-roader, Detroit's Negroes suffered police brutality in excess even of the normal quota for a big city.<sup>2</sup> One story that emerged from a particularly strong wave of brutality was told by reliable UAW sources. But even if it is apocryphal, it indicates the way many Negroes believe Walter Reuther behaves these days. For days Negro leaders attempted to see Reuther, to ask him to intervene. But Reuther was nowhere to be found (presumably, cracked one Negro, he was off advocating a plan for foreign aid). Reuther's secretary is a Negro. Finally, when her husband was victimized by the police, Reuther called Miriani.

When election time arrived, COPE, which in Detroit stands for the UAW, endorsed Miriani. At the time, the lone Negro city councilman was offering an amendment to a city ordinance intended to protect Negroes from the police. When the incumbent mayor refused to support the Patrick Amendment, the TULC broke with COPE and supported Jerome Cavanaugh. The result was a sharp defeat for COPE. Cavanaugh's victory was attributed to the Negro vote. TULC did most of the precinct work, and was supported covertly by white COPE precinct workers. The TULC's influence in the shops was demonstrated by its excellent showing on Detroit's west side, near the concentration of the more populous, militant and pro-Negro locals. Needless to say, TULC's prestige in the Negro community got a shot in the arm, and the name of the UAW was considerably weakened.<sup>3</sup>

The third area where Reuther has fallen is within the labor movement itself. His failure to oppose the censure of A. Philip Randolph (who is deeply admired by the rank-and-file Negro worker), a censure which blamed Randolph for the labor-Negro breach, earned him ill will. His implied threat to resign from the board of the NAACP at the time of the NAACP-ILGWU battle is another mark against him in the eyes of the TULC.

---

1. Wilson, op. cit., p. 29.

2. Detroit Hearings, op. cit. See the following testimony: Arthur Johnson, executive secretary of the Detroit NAACP (pp 300-309); former police officer Joynal Muthleb (pp 321-330); former police officer Jesse Ray (pp 369-388).

3. Greenstone, op. cit., pp 91-93.



It seems obvious here that Reuther, who surely is well aware of the validity of Randolph's charges against the craft unions, and who himself has not infrequently remarked upon craft discrimination, felt too involved already in hostility within the Federation to take on another burden. He is also reluctant to open up the hornet's nest which this type of operation would entail. But again, there is the choice, and for the Negro, Reuther has chosen wrong.

Finally, there is the thorny question of Negro officers and staff within the UAW itself. The TULC cannot and should not be educated to oppose separate Negro representation today as Negro militants were in the 'forties. The failure of the UAW to have a Negro member of the Board in 1961 is probably a product of three rather tragic factors. The union chose to fight rank and file bias on bread and butter issues--seniority rights for Negroes, etc. It did not fight for what it viewed as an ephemeral gain--Negro representation--the winning of which might endanger victories for the Negro on bread and butter issues. The second factor is the over-idealistic propensities of the leadership, which stuck to the "Jim Crow-in-reverse" theory long after the unfolding of a new civil rights movement with new demands eroded its applicability. Thirdly, the qualified Negroes were mainly untrustworthy from the Reuther point of view. Willoughby Abner (Chicago) and Sheffield are both too independent to fit into a disciplined Reuther leadership, as any genuinely independent Negro leader would be.

The rationale of the Negro demand for Negro officers is clearly a legitimate one. From the Negro point of view, even Reuther cannot be trusted--and in the labor movement, if not Reuther, who else? "So long as discrimination persists in labor, the black worker is perpetually a man with a different point of view, however devoted his white brothers may be to his welfare."<sup>1</sup> Because, then, from the TULC point of view, the race question is of necessity the question, Negro qua Negro representation is appropriate today whereas it was not appropriate in 1945 when the question was something else.

Reuther finally put a Negro on the Board, but he put "his" Negro on, Jack Edwards, a respected staff member who has been involved much more in straight union bargaining than in any civil rights work. The Chicago UAW Negroes and the TULC had demanded either Willoughby Abner or Sheffield for the post.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a time when Walter Reuther consistently trespassed on the unconventional. Most labor leaders have habitually sought a level of stability, not to stir things up, and to conduct the bargaining affairs of the union in private. Reuther was markedly different.

---

1. Tom Kahn, "The New Negro and the New Moderation", New Politics, vol. I, no. 1, Fall, 1961, p. 70.



For one, Reuther--the Puritan--never let Cadillacs jar his relationship to the members. Reuther's salary did go up (although not by an amount comparable to presidents of other large unions), but he resisted it. It was as if the position, which had practical necessities, forced its conditions upon him; Reuther recognized that, if he were a Puritan, the secondary leadership was not, and they wanted more money. To this day Reuther retains this aspect; he can still be heard criticizing the AFL-CIO for adopting its ethical practices code in the gambling room of a Puerto Rican hotel at the height of the tourist season.<sup>1</sup>

Other unique traits still characterize him. He is still dominated by a restlessness which appears publicly in his frequent proposals for everything from foreign aid to new schools. But the Reuther of today is only a shadow of the 1946 UAW President, who was always sensitive enough to rank and file mood to keep one step ahead of it. Reuther was produced by an extremely unusual union which had fought its way to stability and then had defeated its Communist element, not by expulsion, but by a discussion which educated the rank and file. The UAW was continually in motion towards a new goal--bargaining or political. And Reuther could always be depended on to provide the leadership, to come up with something to satisfy membership restlessness. The wage increase without price increase demand was stirring because it hit at the heart of the inflation and excessive corporate prerogatives which the union had fought during the war. Even the shorter work week proposal, while not new, was again striking at the heart of the union's number one concern. But today there is nothing.

#### WHERE DO WE STAND?

In the 'forties and 'fifties, left-wing socialists supported, not Reuther, but the Reuther caucus, both as an alternative within the labor movement as a whole and as the leadership within the UAW. That position was based on strategic considerations of the elements within the Reuther group and the alternatives available to it. For a period of approximately two decades, the tendencies of the union to inch toward radicalization were reflected by the grouping around Reuther. This, despite the fact that church and conservative elements also found their home in the Reuther caucus as a means of defeating the once-powerful Stalinist grouping within the union. What were the radical tendencies? During the war, the constant pressure in the UAW was towards relaxation of wartime restrictions on labor's rights. After the war, the socially visionary aspect of the Reutherites emerged in strong labor party sentiment, which Reuther himself squashed (despite more than verbal opposition from Emil Mazey and other top leaders) with promises to reform the Democratic Party. As mentioned before, Reuther escaped from independent politics and challenged the prerogatives of the bourgeoisie at the same time, by using the bargaining table to effect what are--over the long run--political benefits (such as unemployment insurance). Wage increase and no price increase; guaran-

---

1. television interview with Mike Wallace, 1962.



teed annual wage; shorter work week; these implicitly presented basic challenges to corporative "rights." Secondly, at its height, the Reuther caucus offered an unparalleled example of rank and file participation in high level political debate. When the Stalinists were beaten, it was completely the product of grass roots revolt. Thus, apart from the comparatively radical substantive program of the Reuther group, it created a cadre of articulate, sophisticated and politically-oriented militants. When Reuther spoke (as quoted earlier) of the UAW as the vanguard, he spoke words which we spoke as well (although with a larger meaning). And we were right then in terms of the potential of the union and the caucus which led it, despite the failure of that potential to bear the fruit we foresaw. Lastly, although we were not Reutherites in any sense of the term (any more than we are Wilsonites in supporting the BLP), no progressive alternative existed to the Reuther group. The Reuther leadership was, in fact, considerably to the left of the ranks themselves during the 'fifties.

What happened? In all respects, the UAW suffocated in the post-war reaction and the cold war repression:

1) Membership interest and radicalism declined--even though it remained superior to other unions. Concomitant with a bureaucratic adjustment externally (which we shall discuss below), the leadership succumbed more and more to the internal concern for their own job security which characterizes American trade unionism. The Reuther caucus still holds meetings--and there is an admirable absence of the kind of bureaucratic repression which exists in other unions. But democracy has become formal, and positive interaction between leadership and rank and file no longer exists. Reuther himself, by acting to stem more radical elements within his caucus, bears responsibility for part of this process. The general apathy and conservatism of post-war America takes the rest of the blame.

2) The leadership has created an external relationship with bourgeois politics whose ties cannot be undone as easily as they were cemented. The leadership, consistent with the above-mentioned alienation from the ranks, now has a self-interest in the Democratic Party per se, all aside from its interest in avoiding the uncertainties of militant class struggle politics.

3) Its relationship to the Democrats in a period when the Democrats serve as the most coherent instrument for uniting the society under capitalism for cold war purposes makes it impossible for the UAW to engage militantly in either bargaining or politics. Kennedy will not permit a shorter work week or basic control over corporative prerogatives, although he curtails corporative excesses such as the steel increase. He demands that unions adhere to the limits of his bargaining goals. Reuther cannot therefore either carry out a genuinely radical program against unemployment or deflect it as was his wont (social bargaining) in the past with more moderate proposals which did not present basic political challenges. This is a basic point, because it means that today, the Reuther leadership is no longer a hesitantly progressive force, but a definite roadblock to the more militant demands of a section of the ranks. This mainly denotes the Negro autoworkers, who from their militance provide the best vantage point for viewing the decline of the union.



4) In line with the above, the membership-leadership tension mounts as the union becomes more unable to deal minimally with the "minor" day to day shop problems. Unemployment and the union reaction to it has rendered the steward helpless in the face of a) layoffs before the ninety day security period (the union was in the past capable of intervening informally to prevent some layoffs before the ninety days were up), b) new safety hazards, and c) speedup.

We come therefore, to several conclusions which revise our past estimate of the situation in the auto industry. Reuther is still a superior alternative to the "business union" elements both within and without the AFL-CIO. His group has however, in the face of crisis, sold out to cold war bourgeois politics, the protection of an elite of employed workers, and the stability of the official positions of his associates.

The Negroes in opposition to Reutherism are today the vanguard - the inheritors of the past progressivism of the Reuther caucus. They are the architects of the future. The Reuther leadership has itself become a barrier to the fulfillment of those aims which are the logical culmination of the TULC fight and program. The program and policies of present day Reutherism must be swept away for the UAW to once again become a source of hope for the Negro struggle, the trade union movement and a leftward revitalization of American politics.

\*\*\*\*\*

Copies of this pamphlet may be order from:

Apartment 2D  
160 W. 95 St  
New York 25 NY

15 ¢ per copy

Bundle orders: 10 or more, 10¢ each

25 or more, 7 ¢ each

Send me \_\_\_\_\_ copies of "The Negro and the UAW"

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

payment must be enclosed

MA 9-AD-01-3833  
28-2